

Day Dream

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Day Dream

by [bakedbeanbuild](#)

Summary

Dream flies George out to Flordia so they can finally hang out IRL.
Just two guys being dudes

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Day 0

George awoke with a start, chest heaving as he gasped for air. His confusion was palpable for just a moment, muscles strung tight with the same surface tension as water.

Breaking emersion from a dream was by no means uncommon—a daily occurrence, really. Still, it wasn't quite so often that what he was pulled from was a nightmare.

Relief washed over George in waves like the side effects of ketamine and he sat up, if only to prove to his mind that he was safe. And he was. Albeit a little sweaty and fitfully unrested, George felt suddenly calm in his bed, which brought the same promises of safety and security as it always had; the hum of an air conditioner was a distant comfort. He took two deep breaths before swinging his legs over the side of his mattress.

The hallway just outside his door was empty and quiet, a very sensible state to be in at such a late hour. George's parents were asleep, and he was determined to keep in that way as he walked lightly into the kitchen.

Little clinks of glass being moved and the steady sound of water flowing from the sink's faucet interrupted the still air as George got himself settled with a drink to soothe his dry throat. He took a sip and wrinkled his nose. Between this thick taste of sleep in his mouth and the vague metallic quality that was inseparable from tap water, his drink was less refreshing than he had hoped.

The oven clock glowed a pale sort of yellow, not bright enough to really provide any useful light. It read 3:55 and George felt increasingly like shit. Him and Dream had planned on recording 8:00 that morning, but after his nightmare the whole ordeal was starting to make him feel a little jaded. He headed back to his room, a half-empty glass in one hand, and scooped up his phone with the other.

It was hard to type out his password with the use of only one thumb, but he managed after two attempts and made a beeline for his messages app. Dream's contact info was second in the chronological list, preceded only by George's mom, who had asked him just a few hours ago if he was joining them for dinner.

'u up?' he typed out, hesitating just briefly before hitting send.

Before having time to feel dumb about it, the phone buzzed in his hand and George laughed quietly despite himself.

'Duh,' and then a few seconds later, *'Why are YOU up?'*

It was only then that George realized it was hardly 11pm in Florida, but he shook it off easily in favor of trying to think up a reply that wouldn't make him seem like a kid seeking comfort after a bad dream.

'idk can't sleep i guess.' Technically, it wasn't a lie.

'Well try harder so you don't pass out and miss a day of recording. I'm thinking abt streaming something later'

Dream was generally more organized than him in way of scheduling. Not much better, truthfully, but he had vague ideas of plans in place of George's preference to act on impulse. It was a facet of the controlling side of Dream's personality that he usually appreciated. At the time, though, it fit like two mismatched puzzle pieces crammed together. Little bits and pieces from his nightmare danced in the back of his head and George suddenly found it a bit more difficult to shake off.

Minutes passed without him realizing, still standing upright in the dark beside a bed stand that was hardly visible. When he snapped back into reality for the second time that night, he had a singular unread message. Tapping clumsily into his conversation with Dream, George quirked an eyebrow at the sight of a spotify link.

He clicked it, and at the first note of "Can't Sleep Love" found himself laughing out loud.

'Oh, George,' a familiar voice lulled softly down a long hallway.

Usually the little taunts were fun, a small spike of adrenaline that added a level of reality to videos that saw one of them hunting the other. Then though, as George ran fitfully down a seemingly never ending corridor, the gentle calls had taken to more sinister undertones.

'Go away, Dream!'

Usually when he said that, George's voice met his own ears breathless with excitement or anticipation, but he felt then as if he were hyperventilating; too long running and no time to rest. The laughter he got in return alluded not to the wheezing he had grown so familiar with—soft at the edges and faint as the sound seemed to catch in Dream's throat—but a sharp, harsh sound. Deep and full and terrifying in a bad way.

A door came up on George's right, and he took the time to open it and then slam it shut again. The noise echoed down the hall and Dream was suddenly very quiet. George hoped the other man assumed he had actually entered the room, continuing to run down the hall until his legs couldn't carry him any more.

On the last step he could possibly manage, George's foot came down without a surface to support it. He stumbled messily, momentum from the movement swinging him forwards like when you think there's one more step to a stairwell than there actually is.

He had time only to gasp in one final breath before plunging into a pool of black.

“Dream I’m literally dying!” George screamed into his mic, already aware that his keyboard would be audible through the recording as he slammed buttons with an unnecessary ferocity. The sound might not make it through to the viewer though, as Dream was wheezing so hard he very well may have been passing out. The sound was as grating as it was comforting.

“No you’re not,” Dream managed just as the message ‘ *GeorgeNotFound was slain by a zombie* ’ appeared in the bottom left of their screens.

The resulting sound that left his friend’s mouth was so high pitched that George was tempted to take off his headphones, certain a dog somewhere shared the sentiment. It would make for a good abrupt cut off to the video nevertheless, and George clicked out of minecraft knowing they weren’t going to keep going after such a tremendous opportunity to end on a high note.

He didn’t leave the call though, perfectly content to linger for a bit of conversation.

“You were so unhelpful,” he whined into his mic, delighting in the deep chuckle he got for it. Dream was so full of laughter it was a shock he didn’t burst at the seams. “Don’t laugh! You just like, watched me get *murdered*.”

“Yeah, but only because you suck.”

A very faint creak through his headphones told George that Dream had settled back into his chair, and despite being indisputably rude, the man’s smile was audible. They were quiet for a second, until Dream gasped cartoonishly. Before George could ask what that was about—

“Patches!”

There was more shifting, the sound of something falling over on Dream’s desk, and then a singular meow that was so loud George could only assume the poor cat was being held up to the microphone. With an exasperated noise, George adjusted in his chair to get more comfortable, sensing suddenly that they were going to be more than a few minutes.

“Hi, Patches,” he greeted, well aware that the cat wouldn’t be able to hear shit through Dream’s headset. It didn’t matter much—the gesture was for Dream more than anything else.

Just as he expected, his friend made a delighted little sound, followed then by a gentle cooing that had George wishing desperately that he was recording.

“Patches says hi back,” Dream informed him in a very serious tone.

George snorted. “You’re an idiot.”

They talked idly for a few minutes, which turned deceptively fast into two hours. When asked if he was still planning on streaming, Dream made a noncommittal sound and stated that he was fine with just talking for a bit. No cameras necessary. George frowned, only because he wasn’t sure that he appreciated the way his friend’s sudden sincerity had made his stomach feel light. ‘Butterflies,’ someone had called them.

“George?”

George looked up instinctively, staring with surprised eyes at the Google homepage.

“Dude are you okay?”

Dream didn’t quite sound concerned, but the question wasn’t insincere. George nodded as he said,

“Yeah, I’m good.”

“...Did you hear my question?”

George reached for his phone as his eyebrows creased with a sort of passing confusion. He nodded once.

“Yes Dream, and I said I’m fine.”

His friend made a small, unidentifiable sound, and George felt a sudden yearning. Frayed at the ends, he wasn’t sure what he was yearning *for* .

“No man, I asked if you were interested in thinking about meeting up.”

Quiet.

George blinked owlishly at his phone, which he hadn’t actually gotten the chance to turn on. His throat felt twisted and there was a clawing for *something* itching at the inside of his skull. The feeling hit either in the span of three seconds or two minutes, but Dream wasn’t known for endless patience and he had yet to say anything else.

George cleared his throat. “Interested in *thinking* about it?” he asked in place of providing an actual answer. It alleviated a bit of the tension as it made Dream actually laugh.

“Shut up, you know what I mean!”

He did, in fact, know.

“Yeah, I’m up for it. Like... when, though?”

“When are you free?” Dream sounded suddenly brighter and it was only then it occurred to George that he may have been nervous asking. It’d be a lie to say that didn’t soothe his own nerves.

“I don’t exactly have a super strict job, so basically always.”

There was a pause as Dream typed something into his keyboard, and then another minute spent looking for what George assumed to be an affordable flight.

“Does two weeks work for you?”

One week and six days later, George found himself scrambling around his room for clothes he

didn't entirely hate and all the charging cables he could think of. His cat sat at the door and watched him with a bored look until he knocked the long-empty water glass off his bed stand, at which point the cat promptly fled. George took the time to reassure his empty doorway that everything was fine before continuing to stuff things haphazardly into a carry-on.

Dream has insisted that it would be more fun if he came down to Florida, as George "needed to experience the United States" before tourist season. He agreed, mostly under the pretense that it being early spring meant the chances of dying from heat stroke were lowered significantly. With much less convincing, George let Dream pay for his ticket and promised to chip in with grocery money for the full month he was spending there.

They didn't say it, but George had a sneaking suspicion that his parents were thrilled.

"Did you remember to pack socks?" his mom asked, stopping to lean against the doorframe.

George pulled his sock drawer open as he nodded. "Yep, all socked out."

She smiled and lingered in the doorway a moment longer, two hands wrapped around a mug and a fond softness in her eyes.

"Are you excited?" she asked, gentler than before.

That gave George a sort of pause. Of course he was excited; he was meeting his best friend. Still, there was a less than friendly nagging in his gut, one that whispered of this trip's significance, the things at stake if the meetup went poorly. For one, George would have to pay for his own ticket home (a ticket which only had a loosely agreed upon date). He would lose an amazing friend. Their online careers would suffer. George gulped deeply and suddenly felt a little worse for wear.

His face must have shifted with his mood, as his mom took the initiative of actually stepping into the room. She rested a hand on his shoulder and squeezed as if to tell him that she was *there*.

"Honey, you can always come home early."

George recognized the appearance of apprehension in her voice and was quick to flash a smile, soothing as one could be.

"I know." They hugged, but only briefly. "Thank you."

What surrounded George didn't feel like water, not in the way it clung to his arms and wormed into his mouth as if doing so purposefully. It pried at his lips and clawed down his throat, but impossible as it was to breathe, George wasn't drowning.

*He felt **full**.*

Opening his eyes did very little, and there was a moment of question as to whether his eyelids were functioning properly at all. He tried to shift, swing his arms above his head to swim away, to do anything, but the thickening liquid locked around them like chains and George felt, all too suddenly, the unpleasant sensation of being dragged downward. Unthinkingly he opened his mouth to scream.

The thick substance flooded down his throat with a new ferocity, stretching his esophagus, frictionless but so very painful. The tears that gathered in George's eyes didn't fall—a density somehow impossibly equal to whatever was surrounding him, filling him—but stuck to the space around his eyes, stinging with salt; a feeling that could only be described as acidic.

Down, down,

And then, accompanied by the painful sensation of whiplash, out.

George's plane was scheduled to land a full hour behind schedule, as it was apparently storming in Florida and arriving in those conditions wouldn't be safe. He texted Dream the bad news before the announcement that departure had been delayed even finished. He crossed his legs and refused to let himself pout in public, unhappy with the prospect of spending any extra time at the overpacked terminal.

Admittedly, he expected a mocking response, a 'haha' or 'sucks for you.' Instead, George received two pensive looking emojis and the simple message of 'hurry! I miss you'

And George would loathe to admit that the stupid grin he got reading that text did more to comfort him than any pep talk from his mom ever could. He took a screenshot in a fit of quiet glee and shut down his phone for the sake of conserving battery.

'Miss me?' he thought, suddenly feeling very comfortable in his seat. 'You've never even met me.'

By the time he got to baggage claim, George had once again wound himself so tight that the only thing he could think about was the horrible possibility that him and Dream were meant to be online friends and nothing more. That, and the very real possibility that he might just throw up.

What if this trip stretched them too thin and ruined their friendship? Not only would George lose one of the best friends he could ever hope to have, their youtube careers would doubtlessly suffer. After all, it was no secret that much of their online success could be attributed to their increasingly beloved dynamic.

His suitcase went around the belt a full two times before he was focused enough to notice.

‘ *where are u??* ’

George was pacing as subtly as he could, every few steps kicking the ground in such a way as to scuff the rubber soles of his sneakers squeakily against linoleum. He had really only been waiting a few minutes, but the way each second dragged needlessly had his skin alight with static.

Feeling a little stupid for it, George scrolled up a bit to read the ‘ *I miss you* ’ text, missing the exact moment a not-so-stranger stepped through the sliding glass doors.

When he spun around to continue pacing, a familiar laugh rang out from behind him.

George looked up so fast his neck cracked at the back, staring suddenly as a very tall stranger slipped a phone into the front pocket of his hoodie. Unfamiliar as that face might be, the black smiley across his chest was unmistakable. Not thinking about it as much as he should have been, George dropped his phone and winced when he heard it strike the ground, scrambling to pick it up as that *stranger* practically howled with laughter.

“Shut up, Dream!” he scolded as seriously as he could, anger hindered by the wide smile creeping onto his face. It only made the man laugh louder.

Moments after retrieving his phone, George found himself wrapped into the tightest hug he had ever had the pleasure of experiencing, arms trapped between his chest and the, again, *very tall man*.

“It’s great to see you.” The sincerity in Dream’s voice was deafening, but George really wanted him to pull back if only to get a proper look at his face.

“Is hugging like you’re trying to kill me an American thing or is it just you?”

Dream didn’t have an immediate response, but did loosen his grip in accommodation. He was more handsy than George had been expecting.

“Hush, you know my hug is like, totally blowing your mind right now.”

And it kind of was. George barked out a surprised laugh, pushing the man away playfully; his

nerves were suddenly forgotten and his brain finally caught up to what his eyes were seeing.

Dream looked very shockingly human, but maybe that was just because George was so used to the idea of a disembodied voice. He had tan skin, unsurprising all things considered, straight teeth, and eyes that George had been told were green. He couldn't verify that, but it was certainly true that they were bright.

He was very plainly staring but didn't chastise himself for it; the action seemed appropriate enough, given all the secrecy.

"You're tall," he said stupidly in place of greeting, noting it for a third time.

Dream was still beaming.

"And you're not. C'mon," he grabbed George's suitcase from where it sat on the ground and motioned towards the exit. "I think I parked illegally."

George was feeling ever so slightly short-circuited, scrambling desperately to uncross the wires that having a face to match his friend's voice had tangled. He reached out a hand blindly for the suitcase that was so painfully no longer there, swatting the air and listening with a manic sort of glee as Dream wheezed quietly.

"You're weirder in person."

He sounded thrilled.

George was free from the depths that had grasped for his limbs so determinedly, coughing up an insurmountable amount of that black liquid into the same corridor that had run his legs ragged. His neck still ached sharply, residual pain from being pulled up harshly and without warning.

'I wasn't chasing because I needed you.'

George hadn't given much thought to who exactly had pulled him free; hadn't had the chance to between hacking up his lungs and finally feeling tears escape his burning eyes. The voice was deceptively soft and so horrifically familiar. When George tried to scramble away from this Not-Dream in a flurry of panicked swings, the man grabbed his arm roughly and leaned in close.

George hadn't been able to make out a face, uncovered as it was. He didn't see lips as they parted; felt only the ghost of a breath as the looming figure came in close enough to bite.

*'We both know it's **you** that needs me.'*

Day 1

Chapter Summary

Day one

Florida greeted George with open arms and one of the heaviest downpours recorded in the past two years.

Strong winds whipped palm trees scarily, sky dark beyond what could be expected of daytime. The raindrops were large and frequent, pounding against the windows of Dream's car and sending asphalt careening towards the likeness of a slip 'n slide.

Thunder crashed distantly but there was no visible lightning, which George assumed was the only reason his flight hadn't been further delayed. Dream didn't appear bothered at all, continuing down the highway at speeds George was not entirely comfortable with. He tightened his grip on the leather arm rests, leaving small crescent shaped indentations each time he shifted.

George knew Dream was sneaking peeks at him; his friend's shoulders bounced with silent laughter each time.

"I'm not even driving that fast," Dream informed him helpfully after 20 minutes of driving, removing one hand from the wheel for the sake of gesturing to the surrounding road.

"We're literally in the middle of a hurricane and you're driving like we're in NASCAR."

It might've been funnier if George weren't genuinely a little frightened.

Dream waved his other hand dismissively and there was a split second during which the wheel wasn't being held at all. The car stayed right on track, not wavering for even a second, but the sound of George sucking in a sharp breath cut through the stubbornly upheld easy atmosphere. Sensing the joke was over, Dream lessened the pressure on the gas pedal and dropped to a more comfortable speed.

The next time George caught him sneaking a glance, it was no longer accompanied by laughter.

"Alright!" Dream announced as he swung open his apartment door. "Kitchens to your left, bathroom on the right, and living room dead ahead."

George set his suitcase down and slipped off his sneakers by the front door, though somehow he

doubted Dream was all that strict about it.

The apartment wasn't as small as George had been expecting, but dirtied paint towards the ceiling and the darker patches of carpet surrounding the front door suggested previous tenants hadn't treated the property with much care. As Dream slipped off his shoes too, George found himself harboring a secret smile.

"Very epic," he responded belatedly, clicking the 'ck' sound with his tongue. "Where should I set my stuff?"

"My rooms right down the hall; I'm gonna couch it while you're here."

The gesture was vaguely surprising and George felt a little bad for thinking it to be. Of course Dream would want him to be comfortable. What else did he expect?

"I'm taking your bed?"

"Yeah man, sleeping in a bed is part of the American experience."

Dream had picked up his suitcase and was already headed into the bedroom, leaving George to play catchup.

"In case you've forgotten I have a bed at home."

They walked through the vacant doorway together, suitcase bouncing against the mattress and flipping onto its side as Dream tossed it unceremoniously atop a clean looking comforter.

With an air of finality, Dream announced, "And now you have one here!"

"Huh." Staring at his luggage in his friend's bed, George felt suddenly very light. "Looks like I do."

The storm outside was bad and only getting worse, but Dream insisted that having a low-energy first day was actually the best case scenario.

"You just got off a long flight. If I took you out now you'd just complain the whole time."

He was moving around the kitchen with a smile on his face while George leaned back against the far counter. Dream pulled open the fridge and ducked into it, disappearing down to the waist as he shuffled around for something in the back.

Weighing the pros and cons of shutting the door on him, George scoffed.

"Yeah right. We both know you're the one that complains about everything."

"I bet we could consult the comment section on that one." Dream reemerged and hip-checked the fridge shut, a juice box in each hand. He pressed one into George's chest and the cold made him jump. With a shit-eating grin, Dream bowed slightly and said, "For the gentleman, one apple juice: on the rocks."

George snorted before even thinking about keeping up his insulted facade, feigned agitation disappearing entirely as he accepted the drink.

Instead of finding a normal place to sit, he watched with an raised eyebrow as Dream hopped up onto the counter, maintaining less than a foot of space between them. For the time being, George continued his casual lean and left being weird to the experts.

Trying and failing to get the little plastic straw through the seal of his juice box, Dream nudged him with a socked foot and patted the counter as if to suggest he too should take a seat.

“You have a table,” George informed his friend, despite the fact that he was already hoisting himself up onto the fake granite. “This is stupid.”

“And yet you did it anyway.”

The counter felt like a compressed wood and plastic veneer, cool but not cold the way real granite would be. At the far end of the room was a large window and less impressive balcony, shuddering with the intensity of the rain. It was admittedly very peaceful, until Dream scooted close enough to press their thighs together. George swallowed hard and was momentarily mad at himself for it.

Dream was wearing an ever-so-slightly mischievous grin, and held up his juice box as if George should’ve been able to deduce something from just that gesture alone.

“I bet I can drink all of this before you can.”

George blinked and it was suddenly so much easier to suppress the heat crawling up his neck. In a swift motion, he shoved his own straw through the seal and tapped his drink against Dream’s with an underwhelming ‘cheers’.

He looked Dream in the eye and their close proximity didn’t feel quite so unnatural anymore.

“You’re on.”

They didn’t count down to begin, both trying to cheat by starting without warning. The juice boxes were comically small, designed appropriately for children and their proportionately small bodies, and it only took a matter of seconds before both George and Dream were making ridiculous sounds through their straws, sucking air out of empty pouches.

George tossed his across the kitchen as if aiming for a basketball hoop and, in lieu of a trash can, it fell to the tile with a dull sound.

“I won! Sorry Dream, sucks to suck.”

“No way. Do you hear this?” Dream started rattling his juicebox so George could hear the bottom of the straw thunk around hollowly inside. “I definitely finished first.”

“You didn’t toss it. It’s regulation that you toss it.”

Dream made a baffled sound. “You’re an idiot! There’s no regulation.”

Were the subject matter significantly less dense, the bickering might’ve at least *sounded* like a real argument. As it was, they were both grinning far too hard for the bit to be believable.

Dream arched his back and flicked his wrist, sending the juice box flying just as George had moments before. When it landed on the floor, they erupted with laughter, leaning against each other as the room dissolved into a lovely and secluded pocket of chaos. As Dream’s shoulders bounced against his, George felt instantaneously privileged, and whether the red in his cheeks was breathlessness or something else, he didn’t think to wonder.

“You’re falling asleep.”

“Shut up, I’m *not*.”

George was falling asleep.

It may have been the nine hour flight, perhaps the five hour time difference, but either way Dream was wide awake and George simply was not. Every blink was a battle of wills; a feeble struggle to open his eyes back up each time. The clock read *12:13* and George couldn’t help but wonder when the last time midnight actually felt late had been.

“You can’t say that you’re not passing out while I literally watch you do it.”

They sat in the living room while netflix ran through a looped list of suggested titles, side by side on Dream’s too-small couch. George could feel the warmth radiating off his friend and couldn’t fathom how this scrappy piece of furniture was where Dream intended to sleep for the next month. His eyes slipped shut again, and who could blame him if he just so happened to slump forwards slightly. Dream could, apparently, as he caught him by the shoulders and was hoisting George off the couch without a second thought.

“Fine; I’m tired,” he admitted in a low mumble.

Dream laughed and guided him to the bedroom, tugging George’s suitcase off the bed as if he couldn’t be trusted to do it on his own. The assumption was made from a place of sound logic.

“No shit.”

The comforter was aesthetically pleasing but wholly unnecessary, and even in a state of near unconsciousness George knew he would overheat in a matter of minutes.

With Dream still standing in the doorway, he ripped the cover off the bed before clambering atop clean sheets, falling back with a satisfying ‘thomp’ as his head hit the pillow.

Dream’s breathy laugh was lighter than air and over too soon.

“Okay, looks like you’re all set in here. I’ll see you in the morning George.”

He shut the door behind him and left George to sleep in a cocoon of thin covers and the soft sensation of being cared for.

‘ *S’nice*, ’ George thought in that unconscious part of his brain; the one that could barely hold a thought even when awake.

He curled tighter until his knees ached with the effort, inhaling deeply and not thinking about how the pillow smelled like Dream’s fabric softener. It *was* nice; feeling loved.

George woke up with vague memories of never-ending corridors and the same sickly sensation in his gut that preceded entertaining a worst-case scenario. He shook his head, peeling the thin bed sheets away from his sweaty legs, and closed his eyes; a feeble attempt to coerce his mind into a state of rest.

It didn’t help much.

At home, George would awake to the sensation of safety and comfort and *familiarity*, but he didn’t know this bed—didn’t know this place. George tried to steady himself by counting each breath, but it only made the intake of oxygen feel that much more unnatural. The bedroom window was sealed, but Florida humidity leaked in through the vents and condensation gathered against George’s clammy skin in little droplets of anxiety. He reached around blindly for his phone, turning the cool metal casing between his palms after retrieving it from somewhere beneath the covers.

He thought about texting Dream, incoherent and unrelenting in the avoidance of seeking comfort to his friend’s face; the idea of openly admitting his submission to childish fears worse than simply sucking it up. George buried his face into the pillow that no longer smelled like Dream and tried to convince his tired mind that sleep was still viable.

Three hours passed, the sky turning gradually from ink black to pink. Eventually, George fell back into a well of fitful sleep one room away from his best friend, feeling for the first time in a while half a world away.

Day 2

Chapter Summary

Day 2

George woke up to the muffled sounds of someone moving around in the kitchen and a bed that was just as unfamiliar as it had been four hours ago. Feeling all the effects of a poor night's sleep, he sat up and grimaced at the thick taste of unrest clinging to the inside of his mouth; eyes dry in spite of the prominent presence of humidity throughout Dream's apartment.

With an aching head, George quite literally rolled out of bed and tugged off his shirt—the same one he had been wearing at the airport—before blindly pulling a clean one out from his bag. Despite not feeling the energy to do much of anything, he still brushed his teeth before heading into the kitchen; sure that doing any less would be a disservice to the household.

Dream was kind enough not to say anything about George's haggard appearance once he emerged, but wasn't quite so subtle in the way he slid a second cup of coffee across the counter only seconds after George had downed his first. It was greatly appreciated and only the slightest bit insulting, though George didn't really have any ground to stand on in defending *why*.

"What's the plan for today?" he asked, feeling a fraction less horrible with the taste of coffee lingering at the back of his throat.

Dream clapped his hands together and was suddenly all smiles. "Did you bring a swimsuit?"

And all at once George's mood was back beneath the dirt. With a strangled sound of defeat, he dropped his head onto the table with a resulting *thunk* that felt a little excessive even in a state of dramatization.

Dream was already laughing when George groaned, "I'm a fucking idiot."

He *knew* he had forgotten something.

"I'll take that as a no then?"

George groaned again, louder this time, and definitely didn't jolt when a large hand rubbed a small, comforting circle onto his upper back.

"Yeah, yeah we can talk about how stupid you are in the car." George didn't need to look up to know that his friend was grinning. "I need you in a swimsuit for like, half of the stuff I have planned."

And if that statement made George's face crawl with heat, so be it.

Despite the unspoken promise between George and God that springtime in Florida wasn't supposed to be atrociously hot, the car felt more like an oven than a mode of transport. Dream, in what was annoyingly becoming a trend, remained unbothered.

"I'm pretty sure this is what kills dogs," George mumbled instead of complaining about Dream's driving.

"And babies."

He turned in his seat fast enough to induce whiplash.

"And *what*?"

Dream cackled, but mercifully kept his eyes on the road. They were heading into an area more crowded with shops than homes, presumably to hunt down a bathing suit. George had asked earlier about a mall, but was met with the firm insistence that whatever they were doing was an essential part of the "Floridian experience."

"You're talking about when people leave dogs in cars and they like, burn to death, right?" George nodded, distantly surprised that Dream hadn't needed any more context to his initial statement. "That totally happens with babies too."

"Oh. Well, that sucks; you're making me feel like a bad person for complaining."

Dream took the next turn a little too sharp for George's taste, pulling into a mostly empty parking lot and shifting gears to 'P'.

"Good."

They unbuckled and climbed out from the car, dark asphalt radiating heat beneath their shoes before the sun had even peaked. In front of them stood a very bright and obnoxious looking building that somehow managed to be both outlandish and exactly the same as all the surrounding stores, all the while maintaining the appearance of a place where business is in fact conducted.

A bell chimed when the front door opened, and Dream grinned as George took in the surroundings of the surf shop as if the shoddy establishment were a personal accomplishment finally getting the recognition it deserved. The walls were plastered with cheesy t-shirts and boogie-boards with photorealistic sharks printed overtop. Keychains and coffee mugs and other standard tourist memorabilia lined aisles of shelves and the whole establishment was so *neon* that it made George glad he couldn't see the mess of colors surrounding them.

"This is like, the worst first date ever."

Dream made a sound somewhere between a laugh and genuine choking. George felt a spot of pride at that.

"Shut up." Dream's voice was wheezy in a way that was so blessedly familiar. "C'mon, swimsuits are in the back."

They walked down a cramped aisle single-file, as it was the only way they could fit through. Sure enough, at the back of the shop was a generous selection of swimsuits. Dream beelined for a pair on the far left and held them up for George to see. The shorts were, most notably, *tiny*. Secondly, they were covered in turtles wearing sunglasses.

“I think these would look great on you.”

“I think those are the most hideous things I’ve ever seen and you’ve lost your mind,” George said with a flat look, willing them both to ignore the surely obvious reddening of his face. “What would that even *cover*?”

Dream turned the swim trunks around and squinted as if analyzing them. George decided he definitely wouldn’t like whatever was running through his friend’s mind and grabbed the closest pair of *suitably sized* shorts. They had little palm trees around the waistband, but were otherwise plain.

“What? No way, those are lame,” Dream whined, folding up the horrible pair he was holding and placing it back onto the shelf. He took a few steps away from George, continuing to pursue the aisle until a huge grin spread across his face. It was disconcerting, to say the least.

“Let’s pick out each other’s swimsuits! That way we can go straight to the beach and I don’t have to stop home first.”

George’s gut instinct, of course, was to immediately and vehemently reject the idea. *Especially* after seeing Dream’s initial pick. But if he could choose one equally embarrassing then...

“Alright, let’s do it.”

“I’m *not* leaving this stall.”

Dream’s laughter was bouncing off the walls of the very small and very public bathroom, seemingly louder because of it. They were already at the beach; crowded into two separate stalls with the purpose of changing into their new swimsuits. Dream had insisted on keeping their individual selections secretive until the last minute, firm on the stance that they should wear them for the first time only *after* arriving at the beach. It was obvious to George that the idea was just a thin veil protecting him from the safety of going back to find something else to wear, but he had agreed nonetheless.

It wasn’t one of his biggest regrets, but looking at the shorts it certainly wasn’t the smallest.

“There’s no way these are meant for men!”

“They were in the men’s section! Hurry up, other people need to use the stalls.”

And oh god, wasn't that a fun prospect of this experience. George felt his ears burning with the revelation that they were very much in public, and the embarrassing banter between them was no more private than the beach itself. Grumbling unintelligibly, he tugged on the shorts and stuffed his real clothes into the small backpack Dream had brought in from the car. When he walked out of the stall, it seemed like the entire male population of Florida had gathered to watch.

Dream, infuriatingly, irritably, and *shockingly* didn't seem at all embarrassed to be wearing neon pink swim trunks (ones George had to ask a shopkeeper to identify as such) even though they were cut rather short and covered in—of all things—smiling rubber ducks. Seeing him grinning along with a bunch of strangers went a long way in making George feel better, because at least his swimsuit covered him to the mid-thigh.

"I feel like an idiot for whining. You're *way* worse off than I am." George pointed vaguely at Dream's shorts without thinking much of it.

A couple guys laughed, one moving past George to get into the stall he had previously occupied, but Dream was still wheezing hard; hands planted on either knee, doubled over, and George wondered if he was usually this happy or if that's just what being together did to him. It took a minute for Dream to collect himself, by which point most everyone else had moved on.

"C'mon, man!" Dream twirled a finger in the air. "Do a spin!"

And were it any other day George definitely would've said no, but the whole thing was already so damn weird, he just bit back a grin of his own and gave Dream an unenthusiastic twirl. It not only sparked another fit of laughter from his friend, but a couple of the younger bathroom-users too.

His swim trunks were dark, navy blue if George had to guess, and from the front looked genuinely plain. They were longer than Dream's by a few inches, a small mercy in the grand scheme of things, but embroidered in a metallic thread across the back was the word '*nasty*.' Again, George found himself in a position where he wanted to be angry but couldn't muster the energy; it was admittedly kind of hilarious.

Dream recovered from his second fit of laughter and tossed an arm around George's shoulders to guide them away. Ridiculously, he high fived one guy on their way out of the bathroom, leading George down a paved path that transitioned quickly to sand. The sun was bright, but George had yet to notice the beach—slightly distracted by the fact Dream still hadn't moved his arm, and how walking like that only emphasized his height.

George's shoulders bumped against Dream's ribcage as they continued to walk, the weight of his arm a comforting presence despite how the direct contact of their skin was making them sweat. It was a little gross because of that, and a little odd; being led in such a way was so wholly unnecessary there was no way Dream didn't notice it.

George's lips twisted somewhere between a smile and grimace; laced with a sudden bout of nervousness he would rather write off.

"People are going to think we're a couple."

Dream's steps faltered for less than a second, expression changing so fast George didn't have the

chance to catch it. When Dream removed his arm from George's shoulder—something he had practically requested—the now-empty space felt abruptly vast, asking again to be filled. Dream smiled convincingly, instinctually moving to shove his hand into a hoodie pocket that wasn't there. George wanted to laugh, but the barest hint of tension had the sound anchored to his chest.

That is, until Dream announced, "A couple of idiots!" and pushed him playfully.

Relief flooded George's lungs as the discomfort was alleviated, gone sooner than it came.

*

Dream laid out their singular towel a couple yards away from the shoreline; far enough that they wouldn't be soaked by the breaking of waves, but just barely. There wasn't a cloud in sight, the sky an endless vacuum of light blue that stretched beyond the sea and made George feel a little bit lighter. He felt, after yesterday, that they'd had their fair share of storming.

Dream must've noticed him watching the sky, because after setting down their backpack he asked, "Is it too bright?"

"Huh?" George looked up to make eye contact and the sun caught in his eyes. He must've made a stupid face because of it, as Dream suddenly found something very funny.

"That's a definite yes." He bent over and shuffled through his backpack. "I got you a little something extra at the surf shop."

The hints of excitement in his friend's voice made George shoot him a sideways look—borderline suspicious and not completely undeserving—until Dream retrieved from his bag a pair of white-rimmed sunglasses, presenting them with an enthusiastic 'ta-da!'

"They don't really look like clout goggles but I think it still works," Dream said happily, tossing the sunglasses and watching as George stumbled to catch them.

George didn't say anything for a second, staring at the glasses as if searching for a joke that he was missing; something that gave way to a false sincerity. Finding none, he looked up at Dream with wide eyes and grinned, not missing the split second their eye contact shifted into something dangerously soft. It was a stupid thing to get sappy over, so if only to end the moment, George shoved the glasses onto his face without a second thought.

In a tone that aimed for teasing he asked, "How do I look?"

Dream took a second to stare, rubbing his chin in mock concentration. He tilted his head side to side as if seeing George from different angles was an important part of the process. The bit lasted until he leaned in and squinted, the close proximity making George break out into a fit of at least partially nervous laughter. Dream pulled back with a satisfied smile and shot George a thumbs up.

"Like a dude in an embarrassing swimsuit and 5 dollar glasses."

*

An hour passed and the beach only got more crowded.

George was sitting on their beach towel, watching as Dream improvised instructions on how to construct a proper sandcastle. It was going horribly; the sand was too dry, crumbling each time he went to add more, and kids without adequate supervision were racing around in circles a rough meter away, their feet kicking up sand that would occasionally rain down across Dream's

shoulders. George couldn't think of a single thing he would rather be doing.

"You can use a bucket to get the shape right but that's such a loser move—" Dream was interrupted by his castle collapsing entirely. He looked at George pointedly. "That was on purpose."

George laughed and scooted aside on the towel, patting the spot next to him. "Sure it was."

He smiled as Dream accepted the invitation wordlessly, stretching out next to him; perpendicular atop the towel. A majority of his body remained draped across the sand, but the grittiness of it didn't seem to be of much consequence, as Dream's eyes fell shut and he inhaled the ocean air deeply. George looked away and it was quiet for a second—relatively, of course—as they listened to waves break and recede in languid succession. Dream reached up and tapped an open palm against George's arm after less than a minute, skin hot and blushed from the sun.

"Wanna go for a swim now?"

George eyed the ocean and for a moment could really only think about how he loathed the idea of standing up. It was easier to pretend he was dressed like a normal person that way.

Then he looked at Dream, who was smiling *again*—all teeth and no shame—and found himself not caring.

"Okay, but if there are sharks I'm leaving you for dead."

They approached the water together, but Dream was the first to get in. George lagged behind a few steps, waiting until the tide pulled towards him naturally, letting it soak his feet to the ankles. It was colder than he expected, but not an unpleasant sensation given the heat.

"Hurry up!" Dream was already in up to his waist, clearly not quite as enthused with the smaller novelties of a beach trip. George wondered for a split second what it was like—being somewhere so often that it lost intricacy; what Dream would be amazed by if— *when* —George got him to London.

"It's cold!" he called back, moving deeper anyways. Dream's "waist deep" went up to George's navel and felt colder there against the more sensitive skin.

They stood side by side, looking out across the ocean. The skyline was dotted with boats and kids were shrieking with joy behind them, but there was something about facing away from all of it that allowed George to convince himself that he was standing in a place of their own design. Waves rolled past them passively, doing little more than getting his chest wet and making him sway in the water. Mouth closed, George could taste the ocean on his tongue.

"Soakedidiotsayswhat?"

"What?"

Dream tackled him fully into the water and the pensive atmosphere dissipated like smoke in the wind. George flailed in a mess of limbs and instability, brain short-circuiting momentarily as his head was quickly submerged. He breached the surface again in less than a second, inhaling deeply before sputtering,

“What the *hell*?”

He could hardly hear himself over Dream’s laughter, but ran into a smile of his own when he dared a push to the center of Dream’s chest, sending the man stumbling back and down, breath catching between a wheeze and gasp. It was concerning, though, when Dream didn’t immediately resurface.

George found himself with just enough time to entertain a spike of worry until two hands grabbed at his ankles and sent him off balance once again.

They continued to push and shove and splash for longer than either would notice, playing like kids in a private world they were building for themselves there in the water. Sounds of beach chatter and the ocean crashing against soaked sand faded into the background as Dream’s laughter crowded George’s ears, urging him to contemplate when he last smiled so much it hurt.

The drive back was bathed in the orange glow of an unobstructed sunset, Dream’s car moving steadily past gimmicky shops and suspicious seafood restaurants as music blasted through the speakers. He was singing along—quite poorly and *very* loud—so George rolled down the passenger window in hopes that some random people on the sidewalk would be able to hear and share in his pain.

The apartment was quiet when they got back; a welcome relief that had George letting go of tension he hadn’t known he was harboring. It was briefly interrupted when Patches appeared to meow loudly with demands for dinner, but he got to see Dream make little kissy sounds as he opened a can of cat food, so that was welcome too.

They took turns showering, George first so Dream could order dinner; Dream second so George could answer the door when it arrived. It was domestic and peaceful and *calm*, and George found himself sinking deeper into the couch when Dream emerged from the bathroom in a t-shirt and sweatpants.

They sat thigh-to-thigh with dinner in hand—takeout from a local Chinese food place Dream swore by—while buzzing voices through the TV speakers acted as steady white noise to carry more idle conversation. They stayed that way, shoulders pressed together, connected at the hip, long after their food was finished and dishes discarded, enjoying each other’s company until exhaustion from the long day and late night started to settle in. Dream was the first to suggest calling it a night.

“You’re falling asleep on me,” he pointed out, though his voice was void of accusation. He sounded soft, even, as George’s head had been leaning against his shoulder for the better part of twenty minutes.

Suddenly a little flustered, George shifted to sit up straighter. “No I’m not.”

Dream laughed and elbowed him gently, clearly amused. “We did this last night too. I practically had to carry you to bed.”

“I will not confirm nor deny that.”

“You can’t do either because you probably barely remember.” Dream looked at him for a long moment and George certainly didn’t appreciate what his friend’s teasing grin did to his stomach. “Do you want me to tuck you in again?”

George choked on water that wasn’t there and responded with a firm, “No,” the rejection sounding weak even to his own ears. “I think I’ll have to pass.”

Minutes later, George was in a bed that still smelled faintly of vanilla; the weight of a ‘yes’ still heavy on his tongue.

Day 3

Chapter Summary

Day 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Cold, dark, wet.

George knew this place—the end of an endless corridor, wrought without the penance of a seemingly infinite chase. He was sinking; the feeling as distantly familiar as it was alarming, his recollection to the sensation fuzzy at the edges like warped déjà vu.

Though all consuming, it still felt as if the unidentifiable liquid was wrapping around him in tendrils, snaking around his mouth and retreating minutely when George gnashed his teeth with a scream that lacked the vibrato to carry. It was persistent, dragging him down, down, down, until George couldn't hold his breath a moment more and it flooded down his throat with the ferocity of a carnivore weaned on milk and honey. It hurt—a relentless burning that pierced George's lungs and tore his esophagus to shreds—but time can only pass so slow.

*A nightmare; George knew this place because he **had** been there before. Still, something was different, something was wrong. He knew this place but not this pain, and it was only with the dawning of lucidity that George recalled the faintest hints of whiplash; the feeling of being, in a singular sense of the word, saved. The vague memory planted a sickly sensation in his stomach, real and starkly tangible next to the pain of being suffocated within the confines of his skull.*

Dream. Dream had been there before.

George tried to struggle against the liquid—black and slick in the likeness of oil; arcid and viscous as tar. The tears that gathered against his lashes stuck there and formed pockets of salt around his eyes; that too a sensation that seemed impossibly familiar.

He wanted to wake up.

He did.

George awoke as if consciousness had grabbed him by the ankles: gracelessly, in a flurry of sudden panic. Each breath he took was ragged, dragged kicking and screaming from lungs that still felt as

if they were collapsing—a lingering presentiment that clung to his skin like cold to a corpse.

The bed beneath him was bare, thin sheets torn away from tucked corners and pillows cast askew across the carpeted floor of a bedroom that persisted in its unfamiliarity. George itched in that moment to be home, wanting to sink back into sheets that were his own with the sound of an ancient air conditioner lulling him into a state of rest. He wanted to open his phone and text Dream something stupid; get something equally stupid in response without the possibility of his friend knowing something was wrong. Most of all, he wanted to be asleep.

What a complicated thing that was becoming.

George twisted his sweaty fingers into a knot that cracked and popped at each joint, the strain of small tendons airing just on the edge of pain. The discomfort was grounding, providing an important distinction between reality and his nightmares that allowed George the opportunity to separate himself from them. His nightmares weren't real. That was good. Still, It didn't keep shadows from crawling closer. It didn't dull the nausea churning in his gut.

It didn't make him feel safe.

~

Sleeping in the living room of his own apartment felt odd, if only because it wasn't actually a place he spent a considerable amount of time. With his phone and computer constantly handy, Clay didn't often find himself relaxing into his discount sofa with the intention of simply sitting to watch TV. It was especially strange now, when pale moonlight from his balcony wrapped the room in a faint silver; amplifying shadows more than alleviating them. Patches was asleep on the carpet beside him, surprising, since he wasn't entirely sure the cat had been there when he settled in to sleep.

That was another thing that felt strange—trying to sleep on something that could really only manage three quarters of him at once. Clay didn't particularly mind, mostly because it meant George wouldn't have to deal with it, but that didn't change the fact that his couch was better catered to sitting. It made sleep fitful, akin more to lengthy periods of rest than the deep REM cycles he was accustomed to, moderately similar to his highschool days; late nights and early mornings, too many hours on video games and not enough on sleep.

Clay had been drifting in the air surrounding unconsciousness for the better part of an hour when something jostled him back to earth. A sound, maybe, but whatever it was had been brief enough to stop long before he had his wits about him. Sleepy and generally unconcerned, he decided it wasn't worth investigating and closed his eyes again. A couple seconds passed, then a faint *thunk* echoed from down the hall. It sounded like something had hit the ground, and Clay was instantly awake enough to wonder if George had somehow managed to fall out of bed softly.

The decision to go check it out was less of a choice than it was instinct; a small twist in his stomach whispering that something was wrong.

The hallway felt longer than normal, back wall painted with shadows; inky, as if he could touch it and the darkness would seep into his skin. It wasn't the kind of thing he would normally pay any mind to, and Clay found it distantly surprising that he had to purposefully shake the feeling of discomfort it brought. His bedroom was quiet again by the time he made it to the door.

Clay knocked—soft enough that it wouldn't wake George up if he were still sleeping—because he was raised polite, but didn't wait for a response before opening the door to his own bedroom because he wasn't *that* polite.

“Hey man,” Clay tried to whisper, but his voice was still laced thick with sleep; low and rough. “Is everything okay?”

The room was impossibly darker than the hallway had been, closed curtains bathing the room in it. Nothing appeared immediately to be out of place, but nothing really appeared at all. That is, until a very audible intake of air cut through the air like a knife; startling Clay back into the obvious realization that he wasn't alone.

George is awake. His eyes adjusted in fragments, visible first was nothing, then shapes, then the shaking silhouette of someone in his bed. *George is freaking out.*

“It's just me,” he was quick to say; quick to reassure. Clay stepped further into the room, opening the door wider in the hope that it would make the room seem bigger. George didn't say anything, didn't really move at all, and it was unsettling in the same way staring down an unlit staircase threatened the possibility of danger. “Is everything okay?” he asked again.

Clay felt more than saw the moment George returned to himself, marked by a laugh that was so forcibly casual it came out like a sob.

“Yeah.” It didn't entirely sound like George was talking to him. “You startled me.”

The response was weak at best and Clay wasn't dumb. He had siblings—grew up with bumps in the night—and he knew all too well when someone was shaken by things that lurk in the dark. He hears George startled often enough to know that this wasn't that.

“I heard something fall,” he reasons in lieu of airing disbelief.

“I...” George shifted and the sheets ruffled. Clay felt instantly as if he had interrupted something private. “I dropped my phone. Off the bed.”

“...Okay.”

~

There was a long moment when everything was quiet and terrible, but between the cracks of discomfort at having someone encroach on a vulnerable moment, George was desperately relieved. Because Dream was there. His friend was standing there, solid and real, and for the first time since arriving George got the gut feeling of familiarity he had been longing for from home. It made the shadows less stark, the air less stale; his brain, waterlogged from fear, kicked into overdrive.

“Sorry,” Dream started, seeming as if he was really only trying to fill the silence. “I’ll let you get back to...”

He turned partially towards the door as if to leave, and a spike of *something* made George jerk forwards, reach out an arm as if to pull him back. Somewhere in the back of his throat, he made a sound that surely would’ve turned into a ‘*wait*’ were it not for the tension having drawn his jaw shut. Dream stalled, turned back a bit, and George immediately found himself failing to swallow around the lump in his throat.

Something about his compulsive movement must have brought back the final bit of lucidity George had been lacking, because it was only then—staring at a face shrouded in shadow—that he could feel liquid shame clawing up his neck.

George pulled his arm to his chest as if he had been burned, mouth twisting as he tried to silently will Dream away. He could blame it on being tired, maybe. Come up with an explanation less pathetic than being scared of the dark. George was fully expecting at least some mild teasing, ridicule perhaps, clenching his jaw tight as if preparing to take a hit—one to his pride, at least.

But Dream didn’t laugh in that quiet way he tends to do when George does something so unbelievably stupid that he can’t quite process it. He didn’t roll his eyes or click his tongue or indicate in any way that George was being stupid then, stupid *now*. That was good, sure, but more so was when Dream didn’t come back to the bed. There wasn’t any wavering softness in how he responded, no cautious questions, no eggshells.

George finally managed to swallow, insides shifting around his throat like paint down a tube. There wasn’t any *pity*.

Instead, Dream paused and said “I don’t think I’ll be able to get back to sleep.” He put a hand on the open door and used it as support, leaning out into the hallway and flicking on a light. It illuminated only half his face, revealing with gentle warmth a smile that landed just off the coast of playful. “Are you willing to play minecraft with me for a bit?”

The hall light was yellow. It lit up the sleep-mussed edges of Dream’s hair, painting it like a renaissance halo. George’s face was warm again, but the first time it didn’t feel quite so unpleasant.

“Yeah,” he sounded breathless even to his own ears, already climbing out of bed. The cold sweat from waking up scared had dried down to a thin film on his back, and when he licked his lips there was still the faint taste of salt he would pretend came from the sweat as well. It was uncomfortable and embarrassing, but then Dream was waiting for him at the door as if they were going further than the living room, a careful edge of fondness in his eyes that pooled warm and heavy like honey behind George’s ribs.

“Then let’s go.”

The sun was obscured when it rose in the sky, hidden behind light gray clouds that promised no

rain, but George wasn't awake to wonder if it would hold any bearing on that day's plans.

He had passed out on the living room couch, laptop still open on his chest, legs sprawled across Clay's thighs, and feet propped up on the far armrest. His breathing was slow, chest rising and falling soft enough that it didn't put his computer in any immediate danger, but Clay reached out a long arm to move it anyways. He closed it and placed the laptop on the floor where Patches had been moments ago, not so shocked that the action didn't rouse George from sleep.

He thought about standing up—eating breakfast, making coffee, leaving George to rest alone on a couch that was too small for even him—but the night had been long for Clay too. It was easier, then, to let his head tip back, blonde hair splayed messily across the backrest, and slip his eyes shut. *Just for a moment*, he told himself.

The sun continued to rise until it peaked and began to fall once again. George and Clay remained curled up on the couch, dreamless and distant; far inside the small world they had built between themselves.

Chapter End Notes

nightmares go brrrr

Day 4

Chapter Summary

day fourrrrrrrrrrr

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

George slept through an entire cycle of the sun—rise and fall—then long enough to miss it rise again the next day. He woke up groggy and cramped, pinpricks of pain that clawed up from tailbone to neck in a mark of dedication to nearly 20 hours on a couch. He had a fuzzy recollection of Dream being on the couch with him when he passed out, but didn't have any real idea about how long he had stuck around. Dream certainly wasn't there when he woke up. This fact was so certain, specifically, because when George *finally* woke up, it was to the largest breakfast he had ever seen, and it didn't appear out of thin air.

"You were asleep so long," Dream reasoned from his place at the stove when George wandered into the kitchen, "that I figured you'd be pretty hungry by now."

He pointed to the table, which was piled high with a bounty of pancakes, toast, eggs, and bacon so large that it was sort of dizzying to look at.

"Your timing is actually perfect, I was just about to come get you."

George kind of nodded and took a seat at one of the two chairs pulled out from the small table. He sat on his palms, overwhelmed and generally unsure about what exactly he should be doing. Luckily, Dream wrapped up fast, setting a white plate in front of George with a wink that was absolutely *not* necessary before taking a seat of his own.

George didn't serve himself until Dream started putting food on a plate of his own, unsure if the hesitation was a sort of culture shock or a thing of its own.

"Is this how big American breakfasts usually are, or have you lost your mind?"

Dream doused his pancakes in syrup that looked to be mostly cornstarch and shoved a piece into his mouth. Sill chewing, he waved a dismissive hand. "I think the traditional American breakfast is, but I'm pretty sure most people skip it." He swallowed and got another piece on his fork without much pause. "What's breakfast like in England?"

"I'm not entirely sure what's traditional, actually. My sleep schedule is usually pretty trash anyways so..." George trailed off and followed Dream's lead, taking a bite out of a pancake without much mind to table manners. His eyes widened a bit. "Wow that's pretty good; there's no way you made it."

"I can cook *fine*, thanks. But yeah, Aunt Jemima honestly did most of the work."

A little confused, George couldn't help the cursory glance he took around the kitchen, as if

expecting a woman to be standing around somewhere. He wasn't subtle enough, clearly, because Dream burst out into a subdued fit of wheezing.

"Chill, idiot." He was struggling to talk. "It's a brand of pancake mix."

George shouldn't have felt pleased at being so obviously made fun of, but knowing he made Dream smile like *that* made his still-sleepy brain settle into a sort of warm calm. It was early enough, after all, that the sun shone a kind of orange that made everything soft and agreeable.

"You're the idiot." He took a bite of bacon, content with how some stray syrup mingled with the flavor; savory and sweet. "I don't get to have this kind of pancake, like, ever."

Dream actually swallowed before speaking, though it didn't really seem like an action born of conscious politeness. "Don't you eat those thin ones?"

"Yeah, sometimes. I don't really eat breakfast much."

Dream served himself some eggs, shoveling a heaping spoonful onto George's plate as well without actually asking if he wanted any. It was all startlingly domestic, but George wasn't going to argue against more food and would be lying to say it wasn't sort of nice to feel cared for.

As a team, they did decently well in clearing the table; a feat George was near certain would never come to pass. It was apparent that Dream's approximation of his hunger was more accurate than he would've cared to admit, but by the end he was more than satiated. In a non-verbal display of gratitude (he was never great at those), George took it upon himself to pile the used dishes next to the sink and get to work.

"How about *I* do that, and you go take a shower." Dream took to a position next to George at the sink, letting their hips bump as he reached for a dirty plate.

George smacked the hand lightly and made a short huffing sound. "Are you calling me smelly?"

"Duh, always."

"Then shut up." George set the first clean dish onto the countertop. "How about *you* take a shower?"

Dream's smile was way too affectionate for having just been told to shut up, and it dawned on him that he had never gotten to see Dream's expressions when they talked online. George thought that surely it couldn't be so soft every time he spat out a faux insult; that would take away the edge.

Dream plucked the now-clean plate off the counter and grabbed a small dish towel, drying it off and walking away for a second. He came back with empty hands and smiled at George as if he had come up with something brilliant.

"I showered before you woke up." He didn't leave George's side, though. He was waiting for the next plate. "How about you wash and I'll dry?"

And George would be remiss if he didn't at least consider the possibility that he was being spoiled; that he got to see Dream's face, the smile that accompanied nearly everything that left his mouth. It was a dangerous thing to get used to. A frown tugged at the corners of his lips despite how wonderful the day had already been, knowing that he was certainly ruined for voice calls for life a bitter taste on the back of his tongue.

Then Dream was bumping their hips together again, making these stupid grabby hands at the plate George hadn't even finished cleaning yet and it pushed any looming dread off the proverbial cliff, sending it careening towards the ground.

"Fine," George finally agreed, playing off his delay as consideration. "But only because I'm nice."

An hour passed after their breakfast of champions and George was emerging from the shower in clean clothes and an uncharacteristically positive outlook on the day. He was clean, well rested, and comfortable—probably for the first time in weeks—and there was a lingering contentment warm in his gut from the feeling of being cared for. *Loved*, his brain supplied unhelpfully.

George found Dream in the living room playing with Patches on the floor. He had a little stick with a feather on it, waving it above the cat in small flicking motions as if casting a spell. He looked ridiculous, but it was the kind of insight into his life in private that George was starting to recognize as a privilege; getting to see Dream without barriers, without him knowing there's an audience. The word 'intimate' found its way back into the forefront of George's brain, and this time he allowed himself a bit of leeway in keeping the thought in check.

"What are we up to today?" George could feel the water drops from his wet hair dripping down the back of his neck, soaking into his gray t-shirt. It felt like sweat in a way, clinging to his skin.

Dream looked up but didn't stop waving the stick. "How do you feel about another beach day?"

"I literally *just* showered."

"Really? Still smelly from where I'm standing."

Before he really had the chance to defend himself, Dream stood up and sent Patches scurrying off into another room.

"Let's just do the boardwalk then. We can grab a bite and then I'll beat you at some shitty arcade game."

Though it had probably been a decade since he last visited a real arcade and Dream likely *would* beat him, George stood a little straighter in an exaggerated sort of challenge, shooting an accusatory glare across the room.

"First of all, there's no way you're still hungry. Second, you should be... 'shivering in your timbers' or whatever because I'm pretty sure I'll win."

Dream's smile was a little bit wild at the edges in the same way it seemed to always be preceding the issue of a challenge. The beginnings of electricity in his voice when he replied sent little sparks up George's spine, *deja vu* lingering in its wake.

"You're on."

George was either getting used to Dream's driving or was content enough to just chill out for a second, because driving to the boardwalk felt a hell of a lot faster than it actually was. Even when Dream had aggressively tried to make eye contact with him while singing along to a song on the radio—all voice cracks and wheezes struggling to become words—one hand off the wheel and clenched around an imaginary microphone. The insistent obviously-a-joke staring made George's face crawl with heat that he was more than fine with pinning on second hand embarrassment.

It was hardly noon and the boardwalk was only just beginning to fill with tourists; parking had been a pain, but they weren't too concerned about finding a spot beach-front and it was better parking far than paying top dollar for convenience they didn't really need. Climbing from the car, Dream pointed out two restaurants that looked more like glorified food trucks than anything else, and it left George wondering if the man actually *was* still hungry. Luckily, he spotted the arcade—open front and undoubtedly full of sand, and they made a beeline for the entrance on the grounds that younger kids would probably show up early afternoon. Better to beat the rush.

The arcade carpet was disgusting and unsurprisingly creased with gritty sand, a deceptively small room cramped and hot from machines that probably should've been retired years ago. It smelled... well, not *great*, but also like ocean air and salty food; tolerable, mostly because in a shocking turn of events, George was kicking Dream's ass at pong.

"It isn't even called pong," Dream whined as if that was somehow relevant to him being five points behind.

"Who cares?" The machine was labeled '*tennis champ*' but they weren't fooling anyone. Mildly altering the background hardly counted as innovative, and the unchanged game mechanics apparently landed George a place at the top.

"Are you cranky because you're losing?"

"That's it. We're playing skee ball next." Dream made a quick jerking motion with the controls that did nothing as the ball soared past him again. "*Then* you'll be singing a different tune."

The game made a couple beeping sounds, distorted and underwater through abused speakers. A handful of tickets were dispensed from George's side of the machine, and he watched with immense satisfaction as a single one was awarded to Dream. Pity points. The screen flashed back to a default view of the title and prompted for another token.

He smiled. "I don't plan on singing at all, actually."

"Fine." Dream hummed, landing off kilter from a whine. The sound was low; somewhere in the back of his throat. He grabbed his one ticket as if he were proving a point and walked towards two rickety looking skeeball ramps, tossing a look back to George when he didn't immediately move to follow. Dream smiled, smirked maybe, and pointed straight. "Screaming, then."

And whatever feeling *that* planted in George's gut—flurrying and dizzying and kind of gross—he responsibly elected to whimetly ignore.

The skeeball machines were dirtier than the rest of the establishment by a not-so insignificant magnitude, creaking after taking two tokens and dropping six balls from a compartment on the side so they could actually play. George picked one up and turned it over in his hand; it had that old, shredded plastic texture that made it feel kind of fuzzy. Dream picked up a ball too.

"I played basketball, you know." He tossed it in the air and caught it again, giving George a smug look that was clearly feigned for comedic effect.

"If you try to throw that like a basketball I'm going to leave you here." George chanced a look at the emotionally drained employee behind the prize counter. "If you don't get us kicked out first."

Dream laughed and shifted his feet to better face the machine, winding back before rolling the ball a little forcefully across the ramp. The sound was gritty—torn plastic against sandpaper—but he sunk a 50 and for a second George forgot that he was supposed to be feigning annoyance. They made a very similar 'whoop' sound in the excitement, hands just barely meeting in a poor attempt at a high five.

The rest of the game continued similarly; Dream scoring high and George slightly less high, ball often hitting the ridge between points and rolling downwards into the hole marked 10. The competition was familiar and comfortable, a crutch that made George feel confident that this worked. This whole in-person thing. *This* was something he wanted.

He rolled the ball down the ramp with such a small amount of force that it didn't make it to the board at all. Dream was practically howling as it came to a slow stop before promptly rolling back. The ball fell onto the carpet, made a pathetic little sound, and suddenly George was laughing too.

"I want a spider ring."

George was peering into the glass prize case, tickets amassed on top.

"No that's dumb!" Dream added his tickets to the pile. "If we pull our stashes then we can get a bigger prize."

"If we pull our stashes, then we can surely afford a bigger prize *and* a spider ring."

"If you get a spider ring, then I'm getting a sticky hand."

"You're just going to hit me with it."

"Does that sound like something I would do?"

"Yes it absolutely does."

George looked between Dream and the poor employee behind the counter that was being forced to sit through this conversation.

“But *fine*.”

Dream slid the tickets closer to the employee, who gratefully ran them through a small machine to get an accurate count. He gestured to the rings inside the cabinet.

“Two spider rings and one sticky hand please.”

They didn’t agree on two. George thought about bickering about how it was unfair if Dream got two trinkets even after being a pain about him getting *one*, but thinking about those words leaving the mouth of a grown man was embarrassing enough to give George pause.

“Right then.” George glanced over as the employee handed Dream the prizes. “What’s our ‘big prize’ gonna be?”

They got lunch from a shoddy stand at the end of the boardwalk after the arcade; fries and burgers, the scent of something sickly sweet coming from the building next door. They had dropped the bigger prize off at the car, and by then the sun was waning towards mid-afternoon. The air was still humid, but the direct heat of the sun made George’s skin feel tight nonetheless.

“Did you reapply sunscreen?” Dream was staring intently at his face. “You’re starting to turn red.”

George rolled his eyes even though Dream was absolutely right, not really having to respond as the man fished a bottle out of his backpack. Dream popped the cap and squirted some into his hands.

“C’mere.” He reached out the hand.

“Dream-!”

Dream smeared the sunscreen across George’s left cheek, a white streak cold enough relative to the air that it made him flinch.

“What the hell?!”

George’s voice cracked a bit at the end as Dream did a horrible and not-very-gentle job of rubbing the sunscreen across his nose. The next minute or so passed with a reasonable amount of cursing, flailing limbs, and the inevitable fits of loud laughter. All the touching and close proximity was overwhelming, enough so that Dream made a snickering comment about how George “got burned for sure.”

“Great. Now that you’ve rubbed your greasy fingers all over my face, I’m definitely safe from the sun.”

Dream smiled at him, reaching out again. The sun was behind his head and framed Dream’s hair in a halo of golden flyaways. George rolled his eyes again but didn’t flinch away from the touch. At

that point, he figured, it couldn't do much more harm. He tensed a bit, otherwise still, until George felt the air leave his lungs as if pulled out from inside him.

Dream swiped a calloused hand with shocking care across his cheekbone, a tender thing that felt so absurdly out of place—too sudden and inexplicably soft. The plastic from his stupid fucking spider ring was hard and out of place, and gravity buckled down for the swiftest moment until Dream was pulling back and George was struggling to inhale.

“There we go!”

George felt a little dizzy. “What was *that*?”

“Just rubbing in the last bit. Are you ready to head back to the car?”

“Huh?” George mindlessly grazed the tips of his fingers against where Dream's had been. They felt soft in comparison. “Oh! Yeah, for sure.”

They drove home—back to Dream's apartment—but the brush of fingers never really left George's cheek. It got dark, they ate dinner, laughed, went to bed, and as George rested his head against the same pillow Dream had used the previous night—inhaled something sweet and cinnamon—the feeling persisted.

Eyes closed, chest rising and falling steadier as sleep clawed at the edges of his peripheral, George spoke beside an exhale;

“ *Shit* .”

Chapter End Notes

sorry for the delay! i got caught up in some family stuff B)

End Notes

I don't really write but thought it was worth trying bc I love melodramatic shit !!

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